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Adolescent Girls Offered Alternatives to Commercial Sexual Exploitation: A Case Study from the Philippines

Abstract

Background: Up to 2% of adolescents and young women are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in the Philippines, an economically poor country that earns considerable revenue from “sex tourists.” Earlier research, in the 1990s in Metro Manila, described the living conditions of adolescents whose CSE was influenced by family poverty, their so-called “sex work” becoming a major source of income for families left behind in rural and provincial areas of Luzon. Recent research (up to 2014) indicates that conditions for adolescents experiencing CSE have, if anything, worsened.

Methods: Following the original study, the researchers were able to offer scholarships with funds from a Canadian charity, which enabled 84 girls to leave “sex work,” and return to high school.

Results: Follow-up 18 years later showed that being able to return to normal life, was successful for at least 61 (73%) of the young women who researchers were able to trace.

Conclusions: We advocate vigorous efforts to prevent the recruitment and trafficking of adolescents into commercial sexual exploitation, and extend our comments to recent Canadian policy initiatives for adolescents experiencing CSE, since our original study was based on a Canada-Philippines comparison. In advocating the ‘universal living wage’ solution for avoidance of CSE, we argue that demonstration projects such as this can be important exemplars for global policy development.

Keywords

Canada, Philippines, poverty, commercial sexual exploitation, adolescents, prostitution, rehabilitation, sex work, basic income

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ADOLESCENT GIRLS OFFERED ALTERNATIVES TO COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: A CASE STUDY FROM THE PHILIPPINES

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ABSTRACT

Background: Up to 2% of adolescents and young women are subjected to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) in the Philippines, an economically poor country that earns considerable revenue from “sex tourists.” Earlier research, in the 1990s in Metro Manila, described the living conditions of adolescents whose CSE was influenced by family poverty, their so-called “sex work” becoming a major source of income for families left behind in rural and provincial areas of Luzon. Recent research (up to 2014) indicates that conditions for adolescents experiencing CSE have, if anything, worsened.

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KEYWORDS

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THE PHILIPPINES, with a population of some 103.3 million, is a country with a tropical climate, humid, hot and rainy, ideal for growing rice, which is a staple of the Filipino meal. Since World War Two, the Philippines has had a strong presence of US military bases (until the 1990s), and this may account for the development of a sex trade industry which is patronised by men from North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. On the northern island of Luzon, where our research was conducted, there is a strong Roman Catholic culture.

The Philippines is marked by chronic poverty impacting at least a quarter of the population, and at least 10 million Filipinos work overseas; typically, men are employed in construction and shipping, and women often serve as domestic workers or nurses. Remittances from overseas workers contributed about 10% of the national income (Benjamin, 1998; Javier, 2016).¹ GDP per head was US\$2,640 in 2016. However, there is a high degree of income inequality, and a quarter of the population endures chronic, profound poverty, with incomes of less than US\$1,500 per annum (World Bank, 2015). This means that around 26 million live in poverty, while 12 million are in dire need, with basic nutrition and shelter being unaffordable (Yap, 2015). Some 8 million people exist at starvation level (ADB, 2015). The Philippines is the poorest country in Southeast Asia, on a par with Myanmar (ADB, 2015). The most important sources of income for the Philippines are manufactured machinery and electrical equipment, remittances from overseas workers, overseas aid, and income earned from foreign sex tourists. The Philippines stands at the threshold of economic expansion (World Bank, 2016), which could make earnings from foreign sex tourists unnecessary, especially if economic growth leads to the development of a Citizen's Basic Income (discussed below).

According to figures presented to a Senate debate on policies for the control of commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), more than 500,000 Filipinas were identified as being used in such exploitation. If correct (and some commentators put the number much higher, at 800,000 women), this would mean that more than two percent of all women age 15 to 39 are employed in the commercial sexual exploitation industry.² It is clear that The Philippines faces a dilemma in how to frame and administer policies regarding commercial sexual exploitation of girls and women: current law reformers advocate severe penalties for trafficking and exploiting juveniles, with milder penalties for exploiting adults in prostitution.

The study reported below is part of an ongoing, comparative programme of research on rescue and rehabilitation of commercially exploited girls and women in, and from, The Philippines, Nepal and Bangladesh (Simkhada & Bagley, 2008; Bagley, Khadri, Shanaz, Simkhada & King, 2017).

The Face of Poverty in The Philippines

In Metro Manila, the most prosperous part of the Philippines, poverty is not hard to find, in the faces of children who sleep and beg on the streets, who beg outside of tenements of low-standard housing, or who earn a living by picking over materials on garbage dumps, or by touting for sex. The welfare of these children

¹ One study has shown that in Hong Kong, maids may be subjected to sexual assault or exploitation (Bagley, et al., 1997) [2].

² Senate bill, filed February 2015. *Anti-Prostitution Act of 2015*. Senate of The Philippines, 17th Congress (Government of The Philippines, 2015). Several Senators claimed that despite several laws concerning prostitution, the laws are rarely or unevenly enforced. It was also claimed that foreign "sex tourists" contributed more than US\$5 billion each year, to the national economy. On proportion of population who are in the sex industry see also Venderpitte et L. (2006) [2].

and young people is the concern of several voluntary agencies. Foremost amongst these in Manila³ is ANAK-Tnk (an anagram reflecting the district in which it is located). This organisation, from whom researchers received generous co-operation, is led by Roman Catholic priests and sisters, and is based in Paris, France, funded by worldwide donations from Europe and North America. It employs about 120 local staff, assisted by volunteers from France and the Philippines. Special feeding, health care, shelter, and education programmes are offered at 15 centres, to the rag-picking children, the disabled children who beg, and to children and adolescents drawn into the sexual exploitation industry. More general assistance is given to some 4,000 families at the lowest level of poverty each year. This agency is one of several with international funding working in Philippine cities. The work of these agencies is, based on our experience, excellent, but they are inadequately funded to address the scale of the problems of poverty affecting children and adolescents.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation

The current legal and social situation with regard to exploitation of young females in the sex industry in the Philippines is well described through the extensive research programme in Metro Manila, Luzon by Lianne Urada and her colleagues (2012 to 2016).⁴ The world of commercial sexual exploitation of adolescents described by Bagley (1999) continues, with many younger girls being forced to have sex without condoms (Urada and Colleagues, 2012 a & b). Urada and her team (2014) also report cases of young girls being trafficked into the commercial sex industry by false promises of employment, a pattern familiar from our work in Nepal and India (Simkhada & Bagley, 2008).

This selling of children into sexual slavery reflects patriarchal traditions in the Philippines and Nepal, and elsewhere in Asia (Samarasighe, 2008). At least a third of the “sex workers” located by Urada and her colleagues working in Manila bar-brothels were under age 18, and juveniles were less likely (or were not allowed) to ask clients to use condoms. However, there were welcome findings in this research: Urada and her colleagues (2014 & 2016) write of adult victims of sexual exploitation gaining social power in organising the conditions (including the insistence on condom use) in their “work” situations.⁵

An earlier study (Bagley, 1999) comparing commercially sexually exploited adolescents in Calgary, Canada, and Manila, showed clearly that poverty, and not prior abuse, was the principal driver in the recruitment of girls from rural and provincial areas into the urban sexual exploitation industry. Parents often knew what their daughters were doing, but accepted the remittances the girls sent, for often the family had little other income. In the bar-brothels where the girls lived, the

³ Levels of poverty are greatest in the southern part of the country, particularly Mindanao. Because of continuing unrest fostered by violence, and the kidnapping and killing of missionaries and aid workers, information from this region is sketchy, and all of our activities and information pertain to the northern island of Luzon.

⁴ Boys too are subject to extensive commercial sexual exploitation in the Philippines, and in other countries of Southeast Asia. Their plight is neglected in research and rehabilitation programs, past and present, however. We do address the situation regarding sexual exploitation of young males in Canada and Britain (Bagley et al, 1994; Bagley & D’Augelli, 2000), but clearly this an area which needs much more research and action.

⁵ We are reluctant to dignify the commercial sexual exploitation of children, adolescents, and women with the term “work”. Rather, we fall into the group defined by Farley et al (2015) who define the commercialized sexual exploitation of women and children as sexual abuse.

mother-figure *Mama-San*, usually looked after the girls' welfare, and controlled the age at which the girls became sexually active with paying customers – the average age was 14.8 years in the 81 girls interviewed. Before that age, the younger girls danced on a stage in a group that was specifically designated as “the virgins.”

Once active in commercial sexual exploitation, the girls had far fewer customers (average: nine a week) than Canadian girls of similar age (average more than 50 a week, in our Calgary study). In the Manila situation, *Mama-Sans* controlled the number of customers each girl had, so as to “spare her” the adverse impact of frequent sexual intercourse. Since the customers were usually visiting Westerners paying up to \$25 for the girl's services (of which the girl received about \$5, plus any tips from customers), this amount over a week was adequate to cover the necessary remittances the girl made to her family (Bagley, 1999).

Rescue Through Educational Scholarships

Roman Catholic sisters of several orders were active at the street level in the first period of fieldwork (in 1997), and knew of all the girls in each bar-brothel. They made sure that *Mam-San* (“the madam”) treated the girls well, discouraged the use of drugs and alcohol, and ensured that the girls went to Mass on Sunday.⁶ This informal network of social welfare and social control was implicitly supported by police and health and welfare authorities.

The researchers had available funds from a Canadian charity, whose aim was to enable “high school drop-outs” to remain in school. The CAN\$250,000 available from this fund enabled us to give scholarships to some of the girls engaged in sex trade exploitation, to return to their rural provinces and provincial capitals, and to re-enroll in school, sometimes continuing on to college education, with some additional financial allowance for impoverished families. The scholarships were not large, and ranged in value from a total of CAN\$1,800 to \$3,200 (average \$2,940) over 5.4 years (the average length of the girls' programs of study.) Given local costs, the sums were thought to be adequate to enable the 84 girls selected to complete their high school education, and to qualify for adequately paid employment.

The sisters selected the girls who received scholarships. This relieved the researchers of a burden of responsibility but also meant that the sisters were selecting girls of “good” moral character, and who had been involved in “sex work” for a relatively short time. They insisted that any girl selected was not a user of drugs or alcohol.

The ‘scholarship girls’ seemed to form a special bond, and many have remained in touch with one another since the late 1990s when the scholarships were first awarded. This core group offered mutual support for “staying on the straight and narrow path,” studying hard and leading “moral” lives.⁷

Graduates of the program (girls who had achieved college degrees in nursing, social work, or education) acted as the research assistants in the follow-up evaluations begun in 2015. This follow-up established that 61 of the 84 girls had achieved

⁶ We were told by the Sisters that use of condoms in commercial sexual transactions was permitted, since this was for the purpose of health protection.

⁷ Many of the “resettled” girls remained in touch with the lead researcher by e-mail, and latterly through SKYPE. The practice developed among the group of naming any first-born son “Christopher”, and nominating the first author of this paper as honorary godfather! He, joyfully, has a book full of birthdays.

an excellent outcome, completing high school and sometimes a college degree (in 10 cases), and never returning to the sex trade.

Of course, the researchers had hoped for 100 percent success, so it is pertinent to enquire what became of the 23 girls who did not complete high school education. One died, for reasons unknown. Five left the country, apparently working in various domestic roles – whether they had to endure any sexual exploitation as a result, we were unable to establish. Of the remaining girls, three were untraceable, leaving 14 (16.7%) all of whom we were informed, had returned to the commercial sex industry.⁸ The main reason for this, our research assistants told us, was the extreme poverty and illness of family members, with costs that the scholarship funds could not cover.

Conclusions

The results of this social experiment do appear to show that if adequate funding and peer support are available, most adolescents subjected to commercial sexual exploitation (at least in the Philippines) eagerly accept help, and succeed in achieving a “normal” life.⁹ However, we do suggest that if this model were applied in the comparative Canadian setting, the counselling and support services for girls who were psychologically hurt by many years of abuse and neglect before entering commercial sexual exploitation (Bagley & Young, 1987), as well as the hurtful and demeaning nature of sexual exploitation itself (Bagley & King, 2003; King, 2016), would have to be intensively applied, and would be expensive in nature. Whether, for example, funding available through the Canadian (2015) *Communities and Exploited Persons Act* is adequate for this purpose, is an important area for future research.

For the Philippines (and in Bangladesh: Bagley et al., 2017) we advocate the introduction of a Citizen’s Basic Income, which has been applied with success in experimental work in India (Davalala et al, 2014; Safi, 2017). These studies show basic income saved women from demeaning labour (such as commercial sexual exploitation driven by poverty), and had significant ‘multiplier’ effects in terms of allowing women to stay in education, to pursue careers, and to follow personal goals including postponing early marriage, with increased options concerning the timing of pregnancies, and seeking careers (Standing, 2017; Jameson, 2016; Torry, 2015; Safi, 2017).

This is the argument we make for global development: a universal, living wage which will “put Marx’s reserve army of labour to bed” in capitalist cultures (Flaschel, 2009); and will allow women and men in developing countries degrees of dignity and freedom, as researchers in India have shown (Safi, 2017), and as the

⁸ The scholarship funds were transmitted monthly from Canada to the recipients’ bank accounts. We asked for annual statements concerning completed education, but it was clear at the end of the study that we had ‘overpaid’ some girls for several months, when they discontinued education, for whatever reason.

⁹ But it must be emphasized that the girls we supported in the Philippines were in fact selected by the religious sisters as, having been commercially sexually exploited for only a short time. None, at the time of selection, reported physical health problems associated with commercial sexual exploitation, and all of the 61 “success stories” scored in the normal range of the Filipino Version of the General Health Questionnaire (Bagley et al., 1997), completed online at the time of the follow-up. It was impossible for us to use an “untreated” control group, for ethical reasons.

case study of the Philippines has also demonstrated. The Indian example, we argue, shows that no country in the world is so poor that a citizen's basic allowance cannot be developed.¹⁰

Virtually every world country forbids the commercial sexual exploitation of minors (usually those under age 16). But in the developing world (including Bangladesh and Pakistan – Bagley et al., 2017) such laws, as in the Philippines, are rarely enforced, and the sexual exploitation of minors is often tolerated by corrupt police and officials, who earn a considerable profit by protecting this exploitation.¹¹ We are somewhat heartened by the examples from Bangladesh and the Philippines in which adults who are commercially sexually exploited attempt to exercise power over their living conditions, and also try to prevent juvenile entry into the world of commercial sexual exploitation.

Ultimately, solutions to the problem of commercial sexual exploitation of all women (for which poverty is a major driver – Farley et al., 2015) must be economic, which is why we advocate a basic citizen's income for every country.

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DIVISION OF LABOUR

CB and LY designed the programme of aid and its evaluation. CB wrote the first draft of the paper, which was redrafted after comments from the co-authors. SM organised fieldwork and data collection in The Philippines, assisted by LY. All of the authors had an equal role in reviewing literature, and in conceptualising this report.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

A certificate of ethical conduct for this research from the Conjoint Faculties Ethics Board, University of Calgary specified that sex workers should only be interviewed if a realistic and viable plan was in place to offer them alternatives to commercial sexual exploitation.

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¹⁰ Ironically, the total amount of foreign aid to The Philippines according to World Bank figures (2013) would, if distributed on a *per capita* basis to each adult GD 16+, easily provide a basic Citizen's Income for all Filipinos. If the main driver of commercial sexual exploitation work (chronic poverty) were to end, this could end the pressures upon girls and women to enter CSEWC roles (and allow them to leave), if it were initiated.

¹¹ Although we have systematic evidence of such corruption in Bangladesh, evidence from The Philippines of police corruption in relation to commercially exploited sex workers is anecdotal only.

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Kathleen King has an MSW degree from Calgary University and is a co-author, with Christopher Bagley, of *Child Sexual Abuse: The Search for Healing* (Routledge, 2003). Her daughter was murdered in 1997 by a serial killer preying on commercially sexually exploited girls and women. Kathleen is an active campaigner in Edmonton, Alberta for the rights of women who are victims of the sex trade industry. Email: brook.king@telus.net

Loretta Young, MSW, MPhil, RN and Christopher Bagley are marital and research partners. Loretta was Research Social Worker at Alberta Children's Hospital, Calgary, until 2012. Loretta and Christopher have numerous joint publications on ethnicity and self-concept in children in Jamaica, Ghana, Canada and the UK; and on therapy programs for victims of child sexual abuse. Email: loretta.yvonne.young@gmail.com

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